DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 345 638 HE 025 533

AUTHOR Knapp, Amy E.; Whitmore, Marilyn
TITLE Bridging Cultural Gaps: A Workshop for International Students.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 20p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Libraries; College Students; Cultural Awareness; *Foreign Students; Higher Education; *Information Seeking; Intercultural Communication; Interpersonal Communication; Library Administration; *Library Instruction; *Library Services; Library Skills; Program Descriptions; *Transitional Programs; User Needs (Information); Users (Information); Workshops
IDENTIFIERS *University of Pittsburgh PA

ABSTRACT

A workshop was held by the Office of Library staff at the University of Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania) for international college students, to assist them in making the transition to the American educational setting. The workshop also served to heighten the awareness of the library public service staff to the needs of the international students at the University. Preparation for the workshop involved planning an agenda, delegating assignments, obtaining speakers, and setting times and dates. The workshop opened with a short get-acquainted session and a keynote speaker who addressed the pervasive effect of culture. There followed an international student discussion group which provided an opportunity for students to share their concerns and experiences. Next a role-play video was presented which portrayed three vignettes in library communication and mis-communication in asking for reference librarians' assistance. Discussion of the three situations followed, and groups developed practical solutions to issues discussed. Participants' evaluations of the workshop were positive. The attendance indicated the obvious need for such an event and the enthusiasm of the participants led to free exchange of ideas. (JB)

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Bridging Cultural Gaps:
A workshop for international students

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Amy E. Knapp
Dr. Marilyn Whitmore

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BRIDGING CULTURAL GAPS

INTRODUCTION

Until recently, the majority of the international students studying at North American Universities came from countries in Europe with cultures very similar to our own. Today an increasing number of students are coming from the varied cultures of Third World countries in Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East. As we enter the 1990's, internationals comprise close to ten percent of the student enrollment and this presents a very powerful challenge in American education.

The number one problem for the new international student is a new language in which to communicate on an everyday basis. Some have learned English in short-term language institutes while others may have studied textbook English for years but with little practice speaking and listening. American professors, librarians and students do not speak a "standard" English. Lectures are often interspersed with slang, and many of us speak with a local accent which also serves to complicate the situation.

Unfamiliarity with American ways in general and the American academic system in particular constitute an overshadowing problem for the international student. The concept of higher education here is very different for the majority of students. Americans come from a culture which places optimum value on efficiency, task centeredness, and individual accomplishment. Independent study is largely unknown in many other countries, and rote learning is the rule. As a

result, many students have not been encourage to think creatively in an academic situation.

Therefore, the international student is at a distinct disadvantage in our educational system as we encourage individualized projects and independent thinking. American students also tend to be more assertive, verbal and learn easily by class discussion and question/answer sessions. In other cultures there is much greater reliance placed upon a single text or a few items placed on reserve. All of these differences serve to complicate the inherently difficult transition from culture to culture for the international student.

SETTING

The University of Pittsburgh is a large urban research institution offering full and part-time programs for more than 27,000 undergraduate and graduate students. The library system includes 20 separate library collections on the main campus with 5.4 million volumes and microforms, and provides research support not only for University of Pittsburgh student, faculty and staff, but also for those of area colleges and universities through reciprocal borrowing arrangements. The Hillman Library, serving the undergraduate and graduate students in the social sciences and humanities, is the largest facility with collections totaling 3.7 million items. As the main research library in the system, the Hillman Library includes sections for archives, government publications, microforms, maps, periodicals, rare books and popular reading, as

well as providing services for interlibrary loan, database searching, audiovisual, reference, lending and library instruction.

SCOPE

The Office of Library staff had observed that not only were the International students "struggling" to understand the complexities of a large library system but the library staff were also having some difficulties dealing with the international students. In an effort to bridge the gap and promote better communication, the Office designed and presented a workshop in July of 1990 entitled, *Bridging Cultural Gaps: Improving Library Services for the International Student and Scholar.*

The focus of the workshop was to heighten the awareness of the library public service staff as to the needs of the international students at the University of Pittsburgh, and together to develop strategies to improve communication. It was decided to present a multi-media, half-day workshop that would include speakers from the field of inter-cultural communication, group discussions and role playing. To accommodate the busy schedules of public service personnel, the workshop was presented in the morning one day, and repeated in the afternoon of the next, with approximately thirty people in attendance for each session. Initially the workshop was intended to be offered only for staff of the University of Pittsburgh Library System, but because the library is part of a consortia of area libraries sharing common goals and concerns librarians from other local libraries were invited to attend. Although the workshop was designed around improving service to the international community

of students, faculty and scholars, the skills and techniques employed may be utilized to enhance all communicative acts.

PREPARATION

As is true of most projects, the majority of time was spent in preparation. The planning team worked out a preliminary agenda for the workshop, delegated assignments, and then met weekly to discuss possible speakers and report on the progress of the individual projects.

The preliminary agenda called for keynote remarks from a faculty member in the field of communication, time for group discussions, role-playing, and a video presentation on inter-cultural communication, and finally a summation. We decided to produce our own video involving interactions between library staff and a number of international students. We wanted to depict several common library situations with an emphasis on mis-communication. By producing our own role-play video, we felt we could emphasize many of the issues we expected to be raised throughout the course of the workshop. We also decided that it would be especially meaningful to include these same international students as participants in the workshop. We realized these students could share with the group some of their personal experiences as library users, and this we felt would make international students seem less remote and impersonal. Several international students with whom the team members were acquainted were invited to participate in the project by sharing their experiences in a panel discussion. The students represented differing cultures from Latin

America, Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Three of them also offered to act as the frustrated patrons for the video portion of our program.

Finally we decided on the dates and times for the workshops and came up with a final agenda that included running times for each segment. We all agreed that we should try to keep the time within three hours, with one scheduled fifteen minute break to ensure everyone remained focused, and decided that light refreshments should be provided. Using the Macintosh program Pagemaker, we designed and produced three-fold fliers to send out to all participants outlining the workshop and speakers, time and place. The flier included a detachable R.S.V.P. form with room for the names of additional attendees.

WORKSHOP INTRODUCTION

Following a brief get acquainted session, the co-ordinator for Library Instruction welcomed everyone to the workshop, reviewed the agenda and introduced the other presenters. Joseph Ojambo, a doctoral student in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, in addition to being one of the international student volunteers shared opening remarks and introduced the first speaker. The keynote speaker was Dr. Geoffrey Wood, Director of the University's Office of International Student Services, and a specialist in cross-cultural communication. Dr. Wood, a very animated and skilled speaker, began the program with a quick demonstration of cultural significance that also enabled the participants to introduce themselves to each other. He asked that we each introduce ourselves

to the group, and following the round of introductions explained that the way everyone chose to introduce himself/herself has been culturally determined. We had each given our name, work title and work responsibility. In most other cultures, he explained, the introduction would have included name, as well as paternal lineage and family unit. The introduction might also have included additional personal information, children or spouses, for example, but not career information. The inclusion of such information indicated that in this culture we are identified to a significant extent by the work we do, and not by our personal history. This quick exercise not only made everyone aware of how often culture is at work in our daily lives, but it also served to break the ice and make the participants feel more at ease.

Dr. Wood then went on to discuss how pervasive culture is in our everyday lives, and how silently it operates to effect communication. He emphasized the primary importance of simply being aware that we are all culturally constituted, and that much of what we except as "normal" is actually a product of our cultural position. He discussed various non-verbal communication signals, and how meanings change across cultures. Making direct eye contact, for example, is considered rude in many cultures, while in the West, a person who fails to make eye contact may be considered untrustworthy. Appearing too forceful may seem rude in many cultures, while in others customers are conditioned to demand service in comparable situations. He noted, for example, that in many cultures it is acceptable, in fact expected, for the customer

awaiting service to pound on the counter to get the attention of the attendant.

The status of women was also discussed, especially the role of women in positions of authority, because in many cultures this is an unheard of situation. Dr. Wood encouraged the participants to share examples they had experienced of cultural differences in operation in the library setting. Several of the women staff members acknowledged they had experienced problems because many foreign patrons, both men and women, had difficulty believing a woman could be in a position of authority, and routinely asked to speak to the man in charge. Many people also discussed mis-communication stemming from an inability to adequately explain policies and procedures which are radically different than those in foreign libraries. The notion of a set fine rate, for example, was peculiar to those students coming from cultures where bargaining is a given and no set prices exist.

Finally Dr. Wood shared several methods for improving communication between cultures that actually can serve to improve all inter-personal communicative acts. Some of the tips included:

> **Listen very carefully to the speaker, and ask the person to repeat instructions again in his/her own terms to insure that the message was conveyed accurately.
>
> **Be aware of the nonverbal communication signals we send, probably unconsciously, and notice the signals which are returned.
>
> **Be especially careful not to use unnecessary or confusing library jargon.

A concept that may seem completely clear to us may be confusing to someone who is not familiar with the library system.

**Be patient. It often takes a bit of time for the person to assimilate instructions.

**Always be cognizant of the role culture plays in our lives, and make a conscious effort not to let it impede communication.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES

Following the opening presentation was one of the most well-received segments of the workshop; the international student discussion group. Several international students from the university community were invited to share their concerns and experiences with the group. Four students from countries in Africa, Asia and South America participated. Their experiences were consistent with several of the topics discussed throughout. The students discussions focused especially on cultural differences that hinder communication. Non-verbal communication signals were again discussed, and in particular, how particular non-verbal messages vary from culture to culture. They discussed the language barrier, and shared their frustrations at not being able to communicate effectively. To exacerbate the problem, they all feel impolite about asking anyone to repeat a phrase too often or explain in detail what probably was a simple concept.

The library, in particular, presented additional problems for the students. They discussed feeling overwhelmed by the size and complexity of the North American university and the library system.

What we take for granted in North America seemed most unique to the students. The fact that the books could actually be taken from the library, surprised one student. None of the students was familiar with our circulation and renewal policies, and found them very confusing. The unique terminology used by library staff (bibliography, fine, circulation, etc.) was especially bewildering for these non-native speakers of English. They noted that it was curious that we use the same word, "fine," to indicate both pleasure ("I feel fine") and the penalty charged for an overdue item. The extent of automation in the library further challenged the students. They were not at all computer literate when they first arrived on campus, and the necessity of using terminals for a variety of basic research functions further intimidated them.

The students were very open and honest in their discussions, and this sincerity was certainly communicated to the participants. This segment, based on the evaluations at the end of the workshop, proved overwhelmingly to be the most popular. After listening to their presentations and sharing their experiences, the problems discussed seemed much more immediate and personal. We all could identify much better with their situation, as we have all experienced the frustration and alienation associated with being a stranger in a strange place. Following the individual presentations there was a question and answer period that provided library staff with the opportunity to ask the students to elaborate on their experiences, and to offer suggestions as to how they felt we as library personnel could improve service for international users. The students suggested:

**Large, easily understandable signs posted at service areas that briefly and clearly explain complicated library procedures and policies. Borrowing policies and fines were frequently mentioned.

**Printed instructions explaining library policies that the student could take. This would enable the student to read it at leisure, and refer back as necessary. It was agreed it is often easier to understand complex ideas in writing.

**Frequently scheduled tours designed for non-speakers of English offering the students a bit more time to absorb all the complexities of the library, and the opportunity to ask questions they might be a bit shy about asking. The tours should also include printed materials the students could use later when working on their own.

**Finally, when dealing with non-English speakers, ask frequently for the person to explain what you have told them to insure they understand, and are not simply agreeing to be polite.

VIDEO PRESENTATION

This segment of the workshop also proved to be very popular. It was the presentation and discussion of a fifteen minute role-play video created for the workshop which demonstrated communication and mis-communication in the library setting. Prior to this segment of the workshop, we reminded the participants to pay careful attention, and note those instances when communication breaks down and why, reminding the participants to be especially conscious of those instances when culture is in operation. The familiar library situations represented in the video enabled the participants to watch

themselves at work, as it were, and note where communication problems can occur.

The video consists of three vignettes dealing with frequent problems in library communicative interactions. The material drawn for the video was based on rather common, albeit exaggerated, public service interactions. Two of the planning team members wrote the script and portrayed the librarians in the various scenes. The international student volunteers were featured as confused library users. In the first scenario a rather shy international student approaches a very busy library reference desk. The two librarians are obviously busy and flustered, and while the student waits for service, phones ring, patrons register complaints, and the librarians hurry from one problem to another. The focus of the video is on the student, who is obviously becoming increasingly hesitant about asking for assistance. When finally the student's turn comes, the librarian begins to answer her question, is interrupted, begins again, and finally is forced to give the patron a quick suggestion about where to "start looking." The student wanders around the area looking very confused, looks back to the still frantically busy desk, and finally quietly walks away.

In the second segment, another international student comes to the reference desk, but has difficulty expressing his concept to the librarian, and finally politely pretends to have settled on an answer. In the final segment, yet another international student approaches a rather busy reference desk to request information on a particular topic. It is obvious from the beginning that the librarian is having difficulty understanding the student's request, but finally grasps one

word of the topic, and hastens to send the student off in the direction of the card catalog. After some exploring, the student acknowledges to himself that he is looking in the wrong place, but cannot determine how better to present his original question, and gives up.

Following the presentation of the video, the participants discussed the scenarios, identified the problems, and offered solutions. The participants agreed that the busy desk worked to further intimidate the already reluctant student, and that the librarian could have helped relieve this a bit by making some eye contact with the patron, and, thereby reassuring the person that the question was important. During the discussion the participants acknowledged that while the video focused on communicating with the international student, the problems presented can also often occur between librarians and other library users, and that the strategies developed can be used in other situations as well.

The strategies for improving communication included several of those already discussed by Dr. Wood and the international students. It was obvious that a heightened awareness of these issues made it easier to spot communication problems. Everyone admitted that they paid especially close attention to both verbal and nonverbal communication signals, and noted those instances when cultural differences affected communication. For example, it was noted that the international students seemed less assertive than most library users when asking for assistance initially, and then were less likely to return to the desk for further help if unsuccessful in locating information. Furthermore, the students seemed overly polite and eager to follow the librarians' instructions, even though

they obviously did not fully understand. The students' frustration portrayed throughout the video helped to reinforce how often mis-communication can occur. Finally, everyone admitted that while they recognized their working selves in the role-play characters, they had come to identify with the students, and could share their frustrations. We have all, at one time or another been in an unfamiliar place and have asked for help. Additionally, the library staff have felt this same frustration at not being able to communicate as effectively as necessary with international library patrons.

GROUP DISCUSSION

Group discussion was encouraged throughout the workshop. Following each presentation, the participants were asked to break up into groups of seven or eight; with each group also included one international student and one workshop co-ordinator. The groups were asked to consider issues raised in the various segments and then to develop practical solutions for their particular work areas. One person in each group was elected to record the comments of the group, and then each group recorder shared the group's findings during the summation. Because the participants included librarians and staff from all public services areas including circulation, reference, reserve book, interlibrary loan and other service areas, as well as several area libraries, the experiences and expertise were varied. Without a doubt, this contributed to the overall success of the group sessions, and to the workshop as a whole.

The solutions the groups produced were practical, and obviously grew out of the total experience. All groups agreed that

simply being more aware of the role culture plays in inter-personal communication is essential. They also agreed that signage and having printed materials available for patrons to take with them definitely helped to avoid confusion, especially in regard to circulation, renewal and fine policies. The concensus seemed to be that often even when it seems as though a patron understands the policy and has agreed to the conditions, there are other questions which can surface later. One group suggested printing small handouts in several languages that clearly and succinctly explain library policies. Another group suggested once again that the library staff person ask the patron to repeat the policy to insure that it is completely understood.

All the groups agreed that a busy service area negatively impacts on communication in a number of ways. First of all, a busy desk serves to intimidate anyone, however, the international student is especially reluctant about approaching a busy desk because he/she realizes that it may take a bit longer to answer. A busy desk also means the library staff person is under increased stress and is less likely to be patient or have adequate time to give in-depth instruction. A library user is also less likely to return to a very busy desk for additional help if there is a problem. One group suggested that the library should work closely with the international student organization, and perhaps even have a liaison person to help co-ordinate activities. This would enable international students to make comments and suggestions, and would also alert the library staff to special events and group assignments. It was suggested that the library staff be encouraged to attend lectures and workshops offered

in the university community aimed at improving inter-personal communication skills in general, and especially those with a cross-cultural focus. Speaking slowly and carefully, and paying close attention to insure the patron understands was also suggested by several groups. Everyone agreed that asking the patron to repeat the message in their own words helps ensure that the message had been understood. Other suggestions included offering more tours designed for international students, and modifying or designing additional handouts for non-traditional library users. It was suggested that signage be increased to include clear, brief descriptions of functions in various areas.

EVALUATIONS

Each participant was asked to complete a one page evaluation form before leaving the workshop. In the first five questions participants were asked to rate various portions of the workshop on a scale ranging from "below expectations" to "far exceeded expectations." There was also space at the end of the form for the final two questions concerning the overall effectiveness of the workshop which required more detailed narrative comments and additional room for suggestions.

The first few questions concerned the overall effectiveness of the workshop. The participants were asked to respond as to satisfaction with the workshop, and the overwhelming response was "far exceeded expectations." The other questions concerned specific

presentations. The most popular sessions proved to be the international student presentations and the role-play video. When asked to respond about the pace of the workshop, most responded that they would have liked to see the workshop extended, perhaps for the entire day.

The final two questions required that the respondents take a few minutes to write out their comments and suggestions, as to what they found most helpful, and what suggestions they had for improvements. Several commentors agreed that what was most beneficial for them included:

> **The real-life experiences related by the international students.
>
> **Amount and quality of information in the workshop.
>
> **The role play video enabled us to "see ourselves" and be more aware of how we seem to others.
>
> **To hear different ideas and comments about our behavior from Dr. Wood and the international students.
>
> **Extremely well organized, and informative. Good use of programming, ie video, "testimony" of internationals, and group brainstorming.
>
> **Verbalizing our problems and seeking solutions is always helpful, and the group discussion time enabled us to arrive at practical solutions to our problems based on what we'd learned.

When asked how the workshop could be improved the responses in general were that the workshop had been beneficial, and most had no concrete suggestions. Some of the participants did offer suggestions, however, and they included:

**Discussion of major studies conducted to improve inter-cultural communication.

**More time to speak in small groups or one-on-one with the international students.

**Role-playing by participants.

**Follow up workshop so that we have the opportunity to meet together again to share what we have learned and how we've been able to use it to improve communication.

CONCLUSIONS

From all accounts the workshop was an overwhelming success! It was obvious that those in attendance were aware of the immediate need for such a workshop, and appreciated the opportunity to share concerns and discuss solutions. The library staff felt at ease with the presenters, and the combined enthusiasm of both participants and speakers served to heighten the effectiveness of the workshop while encouraging the easy exchange of ideas. People were eager to share experiences and welcomed the opportunity to share concerns. Everyone especially appreciated the opportunity to hear the international students' experiences, and the students contributed nicely to the discussion groups.

In the final segment of the workshop, we reviewed the issues raised and compiled a list of the strategies we'd developed to improve intercultural communication based upon the presentations and group discussions. The recommendations for improving communication included:

*Speak slowly, distinctly and avoid the use of library "jargon."

*Have the listener repeat the information to insure that he/she has understood.

*Post large signs at all service areas which outline the procedures and policies for the area. These signs should be worded simply. There should be, as well, written material available for the patron to take with them.

*Be cognizant that culture is always in operation. Remember that communication signals vary between cultures, and be especially patient with non-native speakers of English.

Everyone seemed eager to practice using these strategies, and all agreed that a follow-up workshop was in order so that we could share our experiences. Another positive outcome of this workshop is that the enthusiastic response has certainly encouraged us to begin planning others, and we hope they prove as popular and useful for our library staff.